Allen, C.N.

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A CASE OF HYSTERICAL BLINDNESS FROM EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY

By C. N. ALLEN
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

NEW data have been found which clarify the story of the victory of Washington over Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781, part of which is of psychological and psychiatric interest. This note is based on a summary by Dr. R. G. Adams,(1) who wrote from manuscripts in his care. Without wishing to reduce the failure of the British to a single cause or to furnish a pat answer to a maze of military mismanagement and stupid politics, the following facts are stated in brief form to shed some light on the extraordinarily neurotic behavior of those in command as being contributory to the downfall of both Cornwallis and Clinton. Recent careful study of manuscripts indicate reasons why Clinton and Graves allowed Washington to march around them at Yorktown, and why they waited seven long weeks before setting out to his rescue. The known facts are about as follows.

Lord George Germain, colonial secretary (but not a peer, using the title Lord merely because he was a son of a duke), suppressed Clinton's accounts in order to exonerate a favorite, Lord Cornwallis—a direct disloyalty to the commander-in-chief, Sir Henry Clinton. Clinton and Cornwallis clashed at every point, partly because Clinton (a commoner) outranked Lord Cornwallis. Again, Germain was more impressed by the dashing sorties of Cornwallis than by Clinton's careful plans which were slower to bear fruit and were not very spectacular even when they did. Also, by some queer twist, Cornwallis had gained Clinton's permission to report his victories direct to London and had abused this privilege to make *all* reports to Germain rather than through Clinton at G. H. Q. Finally, there seems to have been a tacit agreement that Cornwallis should supplant or succeed Clinton as chief under "certain conditions". With this picture in mind it seems obvious that Clinton might wish to conceal any incapacity such as blindness fearing that this "dormant commission" might become operative. The disagreements were abnormally acute. Cornwallis wanted to carry on in the south and was backed in this by Germain, but Clinton ordered him to aid in a projected attack on Phila-

delphia despite orders from Germain not to withdraw troops from the south. In a letter dated July 28th, 1781, we read Clinton's feelings: "Doubtfull whether *I will* remain in the command after the treatment I have received & on the terms they wish to impose. I cannot suppose they will quarrel with L. Cornwallis who they know will take it on any terms . . . That over, if they should not change their tone & let me remain on my own terms, I will resign a command I have held with disgust under the present Minister." The first two words of this letter, written for him by "my friend Crosby", are: "Almost blind . . . ". About a month later another letter ends, "I am blind . . . " after saying above, "My eyes are out, I can say little more."

My own opinion, after studying the comments on the manuscripts, is that Clinton suffered from four more or less distinct attacks of this convenient-inconvenient blindness; two attacks in 1777 during the heat of the Burgoyne campaign, and two in 1781 as cited above.* We have a bit of contemporary evidence from Jeremy Bentham as regards Clinton's personality: "The same accounts still continue that we have heard before, of Clinton's eccentricities: that he shuts himself up for three or four days together and is seen by nobody." Obviously, he feared to have Cornwallis know of his infirmity and the possibility of displacement under the "dormant commission". Murdock's *Bunker Hill* contains a chapter on "The Sensitiveness of General Clinton."

If we examine the four known cases of blindness, we see at once the "evasional characteristics" of the neurotic symptoms. The 1777 attacks coincided with the necessity of aiding a British general with inferior forces, and now in 1781 the situation is similar—facing major issues with fear. Clinton appears as sensitive, moody, and given to much brooding. This is the type of man who substitutes worry for action, and is over-suggestible to the opinions of others because of his over-sensitiveness. Balancing this, these egocentries are also highly social-minded in that they demand the admiration of a circle of subordinates, which in this case was lacking. Failing this, they show their obstinacy and act like spoiled children—as much as to say, "If I can't be a hero, I'll quit." They are selfish and vain; indecisive because of their extreme suggestibility to a variety of points of view. Emotion

* It is suggested to me that these may be one long blindness with varying degrees of vision, for the letters written between what I term "attacks" are to be considered. In another letter in 1782 Clinton writes, "Altho' I am almost blind I will not employ the hand of a friend." And his handwriting was an awful scrawl. The fact that his blindness was not mentioned by his contemporaries so far as a diligent watching has so far revealed, seem to settle the issue for me.

triumphs over logic every time. As Morgan (2) says (whose text we are following in the main for the sake of simplicity and unity of point of view), "What looks like a perversion of logic is simply a failure to see relations that may interfere with this affective judgment." Medical opinion is increasingly willing to call such forms of blindness as this, "hysterical".

The characteristics sketched above are those of the hysteric under conditions which restrict pleasurable existence. In Clinton's case the hurdle was indecision, with all the signs of Adler's "Yes, but . . . " mechanism: as much as to say, "I'd like to do the right thing, *but* I'm not sure how." Or his symptoms really say, "*but* this cursed blindness holds me here". The "sickness profit" (Freud)—the purposive, evasional aspect of the neurosis—is obvious. A way of escape from a dilemma, sought or suggested, has the advantage of allowing him to "keep face". Of the three possible ways out,—death, surrender of his command, or incapacity—Clinton chose the physical symptoms of blindness. The matter of the degree of consciousness in this "choice" is a purely academic problem for which we have no evidence in this instance.

The above gives the psychological background. The naval situation gives another angle on this complex tangle. de Grasse had sailed north from the West Indies with his French fleet. Rodney tried to warn Graves at New York, but the dispatch was delayed six weeks when the ship bearing it was lost in an utterly unnecessary fight. Cornwallis, meanwhile, was taking his time in returning north to Yorktown to dig in. Clinton now decided to attack Newport while waiting, but Graves made excuse that the ships needed repairing. Two days later, Clinton had his second blindness attack. On August 20th the situation was desperate: Clinton was blind, Graves wasting time, Cornwallis now upset and angry over a straggling return to Yorktown, Hood losing sight of de Grasse and not knowing whether this aid was heading for Yorktown or New York, and now we also see that Clinton had lost Washington and his south-moving army. He dared not take action while blind—or, he was conveniently blind so he would not have to take action. There are the two statements. Benedict Arnold, the traitor, visited Clinton that week and was disgusted with the lack of initiative displayed.

Things move fast now, and by September first, G. H. Q. knew that it had been badly fooled. Yet Clinton believed Cornwallis could not be reached by Washington for three weeks and so delayed some more while he wrote Germain and told him, in polished phrases, "I told you so." We know that de Grasse had

outguessed Graves after Hood had also lost him. Graves came to New York, consequently, somewhat upset. Cornwallis now called for re-enforcements if he were to have a chance to win. A brother protested the delay as imperilling his kin. Men were ordered to embark, only to have to disembark again. A letter speaks of Clinton as "a domineering trifler surrounded by a staff of third rate sycophants". Arnold was ignored, which made him peevish. Old General Robertson devoted himself to "Parties of Girls in the Fort Garden, in the Midst of his own Fears, and the Anxieties of this Hour". A lack of wind now kept Graves and Clinton at New York—where they quarreled. On October 17th Cornwallis wrote proposing surrender, and followed it up two days later by marching out of Yorktown and giving up his arms. But on the 18th, the details were settled, the boats were at last ready, and now they were off. Clinton wrote Germain that he was sure to arrive in time. But in a private letter (recently studied for the first time) he admitted that it was a crazy expedition. When the troops arrived on October 24th, they found Cornwallis had surrendered five days before. The rest is of no importance here.

It is admitted that the evidence here offered is circumstantial, at best; yet the inferences seem inescapable. Clinton's blindness is only one aspect of an historical event which Adams sub-titles, "When Britain Failed to Muddle Through". He lists as causes: Germain's mistaken favoritism for a lesser officer; Cornwallis's self-deception over his minor victories; Clinton's failure to outguess Washington; Graves' battered fleet; Hood's failure to watch de Grasse; the petty differences at G. H. Q.; and Clinton's blindnesses. The story is one of decidedly abnormal or neurotic behavior of those who could ill-afford it. From the psychiatric point of view, the hysterical blindness of General Sir Henry Clinton, the nominal commander-in-chief, seems of especial interest and importance.

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